



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Your Redemption is Drawing Near

Luke 21:20-38

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Last week we looked at the first half of Luke 21. Jesus has arrived at Jerusalem and he's spent the week in the temple, rebuking the Jewish elders, the scribes, and the chief priests all while teaching the people about the coming kingdom of God. The key point that Jesus has been making is that the temple is soon going to pass away—Jesus is accomplishing something new and as a result of what he's doing the old temple, as grand and glorious as it was, covered in gold and gleaming white marble, the old temple is going to be irrelevant along with the priests and the sacrifices associated with it. He began by disrupting the whole place and he's continued with his rebukes and his teaching. There were all the out-of-towners from the country ooh-ing and ah-ing over the grandeur of the place and Jesus took the opportunity to announce in verse 6 that “the days will come when there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.” To say something like that about the temple was as good as making an announcement about the end of the world. That's how significant the temple was to the Jews. It embodied their history, their identity as a people, their future, and their hope that the Lord would one day return to vindicate them and to vanquish their enemies.

It's not surprising that the disciples responded by asking when all this would take place. If the unthinkable, if the end of the world is going to take place, people want to know. It's the same today as it was then. And modern Christians are no more immune than the disciples were. All you have to do is look at the annual lists of Christian best-sellers. The books topping the list are consistently by writers claiming to have insider knowledge about either “heaven” or the soon to be played out timeline of

“last days” events. In Jesus's day there were false prophets and false messiahs making the same kinds of claims. There were political groups using the Bible to instill fear and anger and outrage in the people and calling them to take up the sword against the Romans.

And as we saw last week, Jesus addresses these things first. The disciples asked when the temple would be destroyed. Jesus responded *first* by warning them: Watch out! See that you are not led astray! He reminds them that they *will* face persecution. To follow Jesus is to turn aside from everything that is not Jesus: sin, money, power, privilege, politics, *everything*. And do that is to invite the scorn, the rejection, and the condemnation of the world. Jesus had led them away from all these things and he warns them that in the coming days they will be tempted to take them back up. They must not. Instead, he tells them, that persecution will be an opportunity to witness their faith in the Lord Jesus. They will be brought before magistrates and council and Jesus will give them words to speak and the wisdom to know how to speak them. Jesus tells them to “endure” and Luke shows us what that looks like in the book of Acts. To “endure” isn't to lay low while we wait for Jesus to come back. It's to be actively proclaiming the Good News and actively making Jesus known as we do good: as we help the poor, heal the sick, comfort the captive, and in every other way we can, manifest the redemption and restoration of Creation in the world around us.

Again, the disciples wanted to know when these future events would take place. It's vitally important to note that Jesus responded first by giving them these warnings. Obsession with future events and with all things “last days” or “end times” is a recipe for being led astray. They need to be on guard. They need to stick to the way of the cross. Having warned them, Jesus now goes on in verses 20-24:

“But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart, and let not

those who are out in the country enter it, for these are days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written. Alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! For there will be great distress upon the earth and wrath against this people. They will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among all nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.”

This part of what Jesus says it pretty straight forward. Not only that, but it follows what Jesus has been saying all along: judgement is coming and his disciples had better get out of the way. In a sense this is what the Jews were hoping and praying for. They were desperate for judgement to come on their enemies, especially on the Romans. But Jesus puts a scandalous twist on it. The judgement isn't coming on the Romans. No, the Lord is going to use the Romans as an instrument of judgement against Jerusalem, against the temple, and against Israel. Why? Because she has been unfaithful. She was to be a light to the gentiles, but instead she has cursed the gentiles and sits sullenly awaiting their destruction. Israel had forgotten her calling and her mission.

Jesus doesn't mention the Romans by name, but if anyone was going to surround Jerusalem with armies it was the Romans. As history tells us, things got progressively worse through the coming decades. The peace that Octavian had brought to the Roman Empire didn't last. Nero committed suicide in A.D. 68 and in the next year four different emperors followed each other in quick succession, each one seizing power at the head of an army. Locally in Judaea one Roman governor followed another and each was worse than the one before. Some Jews tried to keep the peace by compromising with the pagan Romans, but eventually enough was enough and a violent revolt broke out. This was just the sort of thing Jesus warned his disciples about. This was not the way that led to peace. The disciples were not to heed the calls of the Zealots to stay and fight the

Romans, instead they were to flee the city.

Matthew gives a more detailed account of these warnings and in his Gospel Jesus uses the language of the prophet Daniel. He warns the disciples to flee when they see the “abomination of desolation in the holy place” (Matthew 24:15). Daniel was referring to the desecration of the temple two hundred years before Jesus. Antiochus Epiphanes invaded Jerusalem and desecrated the temple by erecting a statue of Zeus in it. And now Jesus says that something very much like that will happen again. And that’s what happened. The violent Jewish revolt brought the Roman army under Titus. Soldiers forced their way into the temple and set it on fire. While the temple burned they slaughtered any Jews they found there and then setup their imperial standards in the temple court and made sacrifices to them.¹

Those were evil days and there were many who would make messianic claims and insist that everyone stay to fight the Romans. Jesus point is that this was going to be God’s judgement on unfaithful Israel and on the temple. He warns his people not to listen to the calls to stay and fight. Again, that’s not the way that leads to peace. When they saw these events unfolding they were to leave. The historian Eusebius tells us that prophets warned the Christians of Jerusalem to get out and whether it was prophetic oracles are the obvious signs of the times that Jesus had described three decades before, they fled to Pella in what is now Jordan and escaped the destruction. Jerusalem was truly trampled underfoot by the gentiles. Again, this is the easy part. What Jesus describes here fit precisely with the events that played out between 66 and 70, but what about the rest? Look at verses 25-28:

“And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, people fainting with fear

and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

If what Jesus was describing at first in terms of war and the desecration of the temple was pretty straight forward, he now takes a turn toward something strange. He talks about signs in the sun, moon, and stars. In Matthew’s more elaborate telling, the sun and moon go dark and the stars fall from the sky. The sea roars and someone called the “Son of Man” comes in a cloud. This sort of thing makes for all sorts of bizarre speculation and that speculation sells lots of books. One of the best-sellers during the past year or two has been a book that takes signs like this very literally and purports to outline coming events in terms of a series of “blood moons”.

The problem is that the present day “Bible prophecy” folks are trying to take this language literally. Since the sun, moon, and stars are obviously still in their places and shining brightly as ever, they assume that these events must still be in the future. But this language was not meant to be taken literally. It’s part of a style of writing called “apocalyptic” that was very common from the time of the prophets through the centuries following Jesus’ death and resurrection. The Old Testament book of Daniel and the New Testament book of Revelation are examples, but we see this kind of language scattered throughout the prophets and even in the Gospels. It’s language that describes events using symbols. Often times it describes God’s judgement using images that depict the creation itself falling apart: stars falling, the sky being torn open, the moon going dark, great earthquakes, the sea raging. We don’t have time this morning to get into *why* the Jews used this sort of metaphorical language—and they used it a lot, both in the Bible and in other writings—but what’s important is that we understand that it *is* metaphorical

and symbolic. We see proof of this in the Old Testament prophets. Isaiah used it to describe the judgement that came on places like Babylon in 539, for example. Isaiah 13:10 describes the stars, the moon, and the sun going dark as judgement falls. He describes the sky being rolled up and the hosts of heaven withering away at the judgement of Edom which took place in 586 (34:4). Ezekiel uses this language in foretelling the judgement of Egypt in 587 (32:7). We could go on and on, but the point is that these events all took place and the stars, the moon, and the sun are all still shining brightly and the sky is still above us and in one piece. The language the prophets used was symbolic of the Lord’s judgement. When we forget that or are ignorant of how apocalyptic language works we get ourselves into all sorts of trouble, which is exactly what has happened in a lot of today’s pop-theology.

Internet satire websites offer a good illustration of this. Websites like *The Onion* or CBC’s *This is That* programme make commentary on politics and culture through satirical stories. If you understand that the stories are satire, they can be enlightening, thought provoking, and funny. But if you don’t understand the nature of Internet satire you can get into all sorts of trouble. Just this week I saw friends getting worked up over a report that Sarah Palin had warned Native Americans to go back to Nativia and others ranting over a story about a company in Vancouver selling bundles of “artisan firewood” for \$1000 each. If they’d understood that the stories were satirical they would have laughed, but instead they expressed outrage and ended up looking pretty gullible and silly when it was explained to them. If we mistake the language of apocalyptic as something to be taken literally we can end up looking just as silly.

So what Jesus is talking about here is judgement. Jerusalem will be surrounded by armies, the temple will be destroyed, the people will be led away captive. The Lord will not allow his people to walk in unrepentant rebellion forever. Think back to the parable of

¹ Josephus, *Jewish War* 6.4.1-6.6.1

the vineyard. The wicked tenant rejected the owner's messengers over and over. Finally the owner sent his son to claim to the vineyard and they killed him. Enough was enough and the owner then came in judgement, took the vineyard away, and gave it to others. Israel has opposed God long enough and Jesus' point is that God is going to come in judgement on Israel in the same way he came in judgement on his enemies in the past—as he did on Babylon, on Edom, and on Egypt. And this is where Jesus' statement about the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory fits in. When that happens, they know that their redemption is near.

Jesus is drawing on imagery from the prophets again. This time it's Daniel—a book that was written to encourage God's people at another time when they were living under the oppression of pagan kings. Daniel is where the language of the “abomination of desolation” originated and in Daniel 7 we see the “Son of Man”. Daniel reports a dream in which he saw four fierce and terrifying beasts that represented four different empires or kings. He then saw the Lord, the Ancient of Days, seated on his throne in judgement. He cast the final and fiercest of the beasts down and then Daniel saw “one like a son of man” coming on the clouds to the Ancient of Days to receive “dominion and glory and a kingdom...one that shall not be destroyed” (7:13, 14). As Daniel explains in verses 21-27, this Son of Man character represents the “saints of the Most High” and that his triumph and ascension point to the day when “the saints possessed the kingdom”. This was a prophecy of hope for Israel in the days when she was living under the oppressive rule of Antiochus Epiphanes. But Jesus has been drawing on this imagery to tell his own story throughout the course of his ministry.

As the Son of Man, Jesus represents the saints of the Most High—he represents faithful Israel. Israel has been called and called to fulfill her mission to be light to the gentiles and a blessing to the nations, but she has consistently failed. And so Jesus has come to take up

Israel's failed mission and to fulfill it himself. As he's travelled throughout the country, he's been calling people to repent—to turn aside from everything—because the kingdom of God is at hand. What does that mean? It means that the Lord is coming in judgement on faithless Israel and in Jesus—who is finally fulfilling her mission—a new Israel is being reconstituted. Judgement is coming on the wicked tenants and the vineyard is going to be given to those who will acknowledge the owner and care for it properly.

Think of it this way. God began this venture of redemption by calling Abraham to leave everything and to follow him to a new land. Abraham essentially “repented”—he turned aside from the old ways and everything he knew and trusted—and he followed the Lord in faith in a calling to make him known to the world. His descendants failed and now Jesus has stepped in to rescue the Lord's venture of redemption. He's fulfilling God's call to Abraham and establishing a new Israel centred in himself. This is why he's calling the people now to repentance, not just from sin, but also from their nationalistic hopes and dreams of judgement on the nations. And one of the key points is that Jesus is himself the temple in this new Israel. This why he's made a point of offering forgiveness directly and apart from the temple and sacrificial system. The temple was the place where heaven and earth intersected, the place where human beings could be in the presence of God, but now Jesus is taking that role on himself.

This is why the destruction of the temple is such an important event. If Jesus is right, the temple and the Jewish religious leaders were wrong. If Jesus is the true temple, the old temple had to go. And so for the Lord to bring the Romans in judgement to destroy the temple was for the Lord to vindicate Jesus—to confirm that everything Jesus said was right and that he is indeed the one in whom heaven and earth meet and in whom men and women can have access to and reconciliation with God. Using the imagery of Daniel, for the Lord to destroy the temple was for him

to throw down that ferocious and blasphemy spewing fourth beast and to give everlasting dominion to the son of man who came on the clouds. The events of A.D. 70—the conquest of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple, the execution of the thousands of rebels, and the scattering of the people—were the vindication of Jesus and his people. Faithless Israel was judged and the faithful remnant preserved to carry on Jesus' mission of being light to the world and a blessing to the nations.

Jesus goes on in verses 29-33:

And he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. As soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that the summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all has taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

The events Jesus describes here are not some far off event. The disciples will recognise them when they come the same way they know summer is near when fig trees bear leaves, but in light of the tribulation to come, his most encouraging words are that “this generation will not pass away until all has taken place”. Many modern Christians have made pretzels of this passage as they've tried to twist it to escape the plain meaning that these things were to take place in the lifetime of the disciples. This is in line with what Jesus told them in 9:27: “There are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God.” This isn't to say that Jesus isn't going to return. He is, but that's not what he's talking about here. He's talking about his own vindication and the vindication of his people. He's talking about something that was meant to encourage his friends to faithfulness in the coming days of persecution and we see this in the following verses:

“But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with

dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap. For it will come upon all who dwell on the face of the whole earth. But stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

And every day he was teaching in the temple, but at night he went out and lodged on the mount called Olivet. And early in the morning all the people came to him in the temple to hear him. (Luke 21:34-38)

“But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down.” It’s not hard to imagine how easily the disciples and those first Christians might find themselves weighed down. There was turmoil all around them and it was easy to live in fear of what might happen in future. It was easy to get caught up in the politics and rabble-rousing of the day. And even all the strife aside, it was easy to get bogged down in the day to day realities of life—of work and family and making ends meet. It was easy to fall into doubt about Jesus when they were cast out of the synagogues and persecuted by the Jews. It was easy to lose heart seeing friends and leaders like Stephen stoned for faith in Jesus. The Christians in Jerusalem heard stories about the Good News spreading through the gentile lands in Greece and Italy, but at home they faced only hostility and rejection. Other Jews mocked their faith in a crucified Messiah. Over thirty years later and nothing much had changed. But they persevered. They continued to meet together as the Church. They read and preached the Word. They prayed and they celebrated the Sacraments. And they watched and waited for the vindication that Jesus had said would come.

And think of our own situation. We’re gathered here for Word and Sacrament as those early Christians in Jerusalem gathered. You and I leave this place and despite the grace we’ve received here and the encouragement our brothers and sisters give us, it’s easy to lose heart. Many people—maybe most people—in the world around us consider our faith

irrelevant. They think we’re probably well-meaning but misguided. Christianity is old-fashioned and Christians are kill-joys. If we push it, they tell us that our faith is based on myths or they point to the times when Christians have done horrible things in the world and say they want no part of it and wonder why we do. If Christianity is such a great thing and if God or if Jesus are real, why is there so much evil in the world and why does it happen to good people?

Dear Friends, Jesus tells us the same thing he told our brothers and sisters in the First Century: stay awake and pray for strength; be on guard and don’t let anyone lead you astray. Be patient and keep telling, keep preaching the story. Just this week someone told me that she thought she wasn’t equipped to tell Jesus’ story and that she couldn’t remember how it goes and what the important parts are. It occurred to me that we have an outline to follow in the Church Year. How many years have you read the Scriptures, prayed through them, and heard them preached in the rhythm of the Church Year? You already know the outline of Jesus’ story. You already know why it’s good news.

In Advent we hear the prophets lamenting Israel’s faithlessness as they look in hope to the coming of one who will get God’s plan of redemption back on track. John the Baptist cries out: “Repent for the kingdom is at hand!” At Christmas the Messiah arrives. The King comes, born in humility—a servant to his people. At Epiphany we get our first hint that he hasn’t come merely to Israel, but has come to bring the gentiles into the redeeming story as God meant all along. Where faithless Israel forgot her mission to the gentiles, in establishing a new Israel, Jesus will reach out to them. Through Lent and leading up to Good Friday we see Jesus on the way to the Cross, showing us the way of peace as he gives his life for the sake of his people. At Easter he rises from the grave and in his victory over sin and death he reminds us who our true enemies are and that we are no longer subject to them. In his Ascension we see him taking his throne and we’re

reminded that no matter what we face, he is sovereign, he is Lord, and his kingdom has come. And finally at Pentecost we see the new life Jesus promised wash over his people in the giving of the Holy Spirit by our King. At Pentecost the Spirit gathers the faithful remnant to of Israel into a new community that reaches out from Jerusalem to Judaea, to Samaria, and eventually to the whole world, finally fulfilling the mission that the Lord had so long ago given to Abraham. Brothers and Sisters, remember this story, tell this story, preach this story. Live this story. This is the story proclaiming that Jesus is Lord, that his kingdom has come, and that the world is called to be part of it.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, give us grace to be patient as we walk the way of the Cross. Give us discernment that we not be led astray by false prophets, false teaching, and sensationalism. As we plod through the day to day routine and trials of life, keep our eyes focused on Jesus, on his kingdom, and on the mission he has given us. Keep our feet walking the way of the Cross, the way of peace, the way of servanthood and sacrifice despite the voices around us shouting at us to be outraged over this or over that and to look out for our own interests. And remind us, Father, to keep telling and to keep living the story of Jesus—to keep proclaiming the Good News Jesus is Lord and to keep calling the world to join us in the life of his kingdom. We ask this in his name. Amen.